

considerable time this work period to these bills. I have indicated we are going to do three before we take our break for the Jewish holidays. We have already done Homeland Security appropriations. If we do that, we would wind up doing a third of all the bills we need to do, which is progress.

So in the next 2 weeks, it is my hope we can complete the bills I have talked about. Each of these bills was reported out of the committee unanimously, or nearly unanimously, and I hope bipartisan cooperation continues on the floor.

We must move forward on a number of other issues. The Children's Health Insurance Program is a bill that received wide bipartisan support in the Senate. I hope we can complete that. It is important that we do that. I know just a few people can cause a lot of trouble here. Both the distinguished Republican leader and I realize that.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUEST—H.R. 976

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that when the Senate receives a message from the House on H.R. 976, the CHIP legislation, the Senate disagree to the House amendment, if appropriate, and insist on its amendment, request a conference with the House on the disagreeing votes of the two Houses, and that the Chair be authorized to appoint conferees on the part of the Senate.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Is there objection?

Mr. MCCONNELL. Reserving the right to object.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The minority leader.

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, the message has not yet been received; therefore, the request is a little premature. We would need to consult with our colleagues on this when they receive the request from the House; therefore, for the time being, I would object.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Objection is heard.

Mr. REID. Mr. President, above all, every day we must continue to fight for a sensible, responsible path out of Iraq in order to restore America's national security. Later this month, President Bush will issue a report on the state of the war that Congress required of him. We hope he will use this report as an opportunity to finally do the right thing and begin to change the core U.S. mission and begin reducing U.S. forces in Iraq. We will receive this report with an open mind. We will consider the White House findings carefully and thoughtfully, but we must remember the President's report comes after more than 4 years of war, with almost 3,800 dead American soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen, tens of thousands more injured, and American taxpayers having to foot a bill of more than half a trillion dollars.

President Bush will send General Petraeus to Capitol Hill to testify. There is not one Member of this body who does not respect General Petraeus.

He is a good man and a good soldier. But Senator BIDEN said over the weekend that there are not 12 Senators out of 100 who support the war as it is now being conducted—not 12. He said that over and over again. I agree with Senator BIDEN.

But the President cannot hide behind the generals. This is George Bush's war. He is responsible for the mistakes and missteps that leave our troops mired in a civil war with no end in sight.

The mission has not been accomplished. When he said "Bring 'em on," that was the wrong thing to say. According to the President when he set forth his escalation policy, the purpose of the troop increase was to give the Iraqis space and safety to forge political progress—to build a sustainable government and provide for their own security.

None of this has happened. Take, for example, the LA Times today, the headline: "Troop Buildup Fails to Recoil Iraq," or today's GAO report, which tells us the President's strategy has failed to achieve 15 of 18 key benchmarks. Sectarian strife is deepening and violence shifting. Last month was the deadliest for the Iraqi people in the history of the war. Contrary to the assertions of the President, Iraq's leaders have not honored the sacrifices of our troops by taking meaningful steps toward building a country that can stand on its own. That is not our troops' fault, nor is it a problem our troops can solve. It is an Iraqi political problem, not a U.S. military problem. We cannot continue to sacrifice American lives, deplete our Treasury, and weaken our national security in pursuit of a goal that the Iraqi people themselves show no interest in achieving.

Meanwhile, al-Qaida is resurgent, and we all know Osama bin Laden remains at large. There are countless stories that highlight the human toll this war has taken. Let's look to Nevada for one.

As I was flying back, I was stunned by reading in the Las Vegas Sun newspaper a heartbreaking story of Army PFC Travis Virgadamo, 19 years old, in his second tour of duty in Iraq. He loved his country. He loved serving in the military. That is what he always wanted to do. Yet after months of serving in Iraq, as he described it, "being ordered into houses without knowing what was behind strangers' doors, walking along on roadsides fearing the next step could trigger lethal explosives"—those were his words—he left. He tried to get help. He came back, told his parents he did not want to go back. He told his military superiors he didn't want to go back. He was given medicine. The newspaper reported it was Prozac. As I said, he sought therapy, mental health care while overseas, but last week the military informed his family he committed suicide. He was 19 years old.

Last year, the Veterans Affairs Department reported that more than

56,000 veterans of Iraq have been diagnosed with mental illness. We have heard countless examples of our troops receiving inadequate mental health care, and in many cases being sent back into battle, like this young man, PFC Travis Virgadamo.

My heart goes out to his family. They are quoted in the paper, as to what he said when he was trying to stay here and not go back. They have suffered so much. We owe them a change of course.

Many of my Republican friends have long held September is the month for a policy change in Iraq. Those who opposed our early efforts asked for time and patience to let the war continue. The calendar has not changed. It is September. We have reached this goal. It is time to make a decision. We can't continue the way we are. We cannot afford it militarily and financially.

We will soon hear, as I have indicated, from the President and his generals what we know already, political progress has failed. Now it is time for our Republican colleagues—I so admire and appreciate those who have joined us in the past. For example, on the Webb amendment we got 57 votes. With Senator JOHNSON coming back we need two more Republican votes to do the right thing: When you go to Iraq for 15 months, you stay home for 15 months. That is what WEBB did. That is why we picked up Republican votes. We need two more Republican votes.

It is time for our Republican colleagues to join with us, to stand for our troops and the American people to responsibly end this war; to do things that will change it.

I began with words of tribute for two of our most distinguished colleagues, Senators WARNER and KENNEDY, one Democrat, one Republican, both firmly committed to progress, progress for our country. They recognize and they have shown it can only be accomplished by bipartisanship. All of us appreciate the Herculean efforts of Senator KENNEDY, working with Democrats and Republicans alike on immigration, Leave No Child Behind, and Medicare. The work that Senator WARNER has done for years, especially on the Defense authorization bill, on a bipartisan basis—I appreciate it; many of us do. The country appreciates it. The people of Virginia appreciate Senator WARNER's courage to stand up to the President of his own party and reach across the aisle to reach a responsible end to this war. As we tackle the challenges ahead, the outstanding work of these two great Senators ought to be our compass.

I am confident and hopeful all 100 of us will follow their lead and keep America moving forward.

RECOGNITION OF THE REPUBLICAN LEADER

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Republican leader is recognized.

SENATORS WARNER AND
KENNEDY

Mr. McCONNELL. Mr. President, we did, indeed, with the announcement by Senator WARNER of his retirement at the end of this term, begin to confront the reality of the Senate without JOHN WARNER. I will have a good deal more to say about his career in the coming months. Of course, we will have ample opportunity to celebrate his remarkable service in the Senate because, fortunately, he will be here until January of 2009, continuing to perform his extraordinary service on behalf of our Nation.

He indicated to me Friday when we were talking that he had added up the total amount of his time in public service, and it was something like 45 years—truly a remarkable patriot.

Of course, later this afternoon Senator KENNEDY will cast his 15,000th vote—another giant in this body who should be recognized for his extraordinary accomplishments. He came to the Senate at age 30. He has been here quite a while and made an enormous contribution to our country. We congratulate him on achieving this milestone.

RETURN FROM THE AUGUST
RECESS

Mr. McCONNELL. Mr. President, as we resume our business here in the Senate, we do so in the hope that we have learned some lessons over the last 8 months. The chief lesson we should have learned, in my view, is that the culture of the endless campaign may win headlines, but it doesn't win much beyond that.

None of us is so naive as to think that the life of an elected politician doesn't involve politics—obviously it does. But we also know that making laws often demands leaving the politics aside. The bitter debates over the war in Iraq and a thin list of significant legislative achievements so far in the 110th Congress are all the proof of that we need.

That's the lesson of the last 8 months—that if we expect to accomplish anything here we need to lower the political temperature. And it is urgent as we return here today that we do just that.

Cooperation is as important on routine business as it is on contentious things. We are now just 4 weeks away from the beginning of the new fiscal year, and we have not sent a single one of the twelve annual appropriations bills to the President's desk. This almost certainly means we will soon be looking at an appropriations train wreck here in the next few weeks, followed by a continuing resolution to keep the Government running.

This isn't the way it's supposed to be. Indeed, it was not all that long ago that Democrats themselves were denouncing Republicans for doing this very thing.

Faced with the same situation last year, the current assistant majority leader railed against the notion of a continuing resolution, accusing Republicans, as he put it, "of failing to do the most fundamental job Congress is expected to do." I think the assistant majority leader had that right. He said that calling the 109th Congress a do-nothing Congress would be an insult to the original do-nothing Congress of 1948. And he vowed to finish the unfinished business of the last Congress.

Yet now, as Democrats enter the ninth month poised to make the very same mistake we did, we have not heard a note of self-criticism from the other side. This kind of selective criticism might work on the campaign trail. But it's a clear recipe for frustration and defeat in the Senate. We need to get these bills passed and over to the President's desk for a signature. And relentless partisanship is not going to do that.

The most heated politics have been reserved, of course, for the war. So if we are going to correct course, we will need to start there. The Congress voted in May to have General Petraeus report back this month on progress in Iraq, and the Congress should listen to what he says, without prejudice, when he gets here.

This is not a baseless hope. We have seen some of the sharpest early critics of the general's new military strategy defending it in recent weeks after seeing for themselves the impact it has had in former al-Qaida strongholds like Anbar Province.

Republicans welcome this kind of honest reassessment. As more Democrats have the courage to acknowledge the good news as well as the bad news in Iraq, we all have reason to hope for the kind of cooperative legislative strategy that has been lacking until now.

The political path the majority has often chosen over the last 8 months has reduced us at times to theatrics on the war. It has left us scrambling on appropriations. And it threatens to prevent us from addressing a number of other vital issues that the American people don't want us to put off. We need to act, cooperatively, before it is too late to address these issues within the limited time we have.

Time is short, and the list is long. We need to act on a farm bill by the end of the month. We need to act on vital free trade agreements and on the debt limit ceiling, which we will reach sometime in early October. We need to extend the FISA legislation.

More than 40 tax provisions expire at the end of this year. We need to extend them before it is too late, and we can only do it if we resist calls to pay for them with equally unpopular offsets.

The other side tends to look at the budget in terms of Newtonian physics: They think every cut calls for an equal and opposite hike. Yet we have seen that this is not the case, with money now flooding into the Treasury at

record rates since the 2001 and 2003 cuts. We should acknowledge the facts and continue this prosperity without imposing new pain on taxpayers who responded to this relief by growing this economy.

The current alternative minimum tax relief is current no more—it expired at the end of last year. In the last three Congresses, we extended this relief before the Fourth of July recess so taxpayers knew with certainty the relief would be there. Yet here we stand, after the August recess, with no sign of any effort to extend it again—no bill reported by committee, not even a markup scheduled.

Unless this relief is extended, 20 million new taxpayers will face this punishing tax when they file their returns next year. They need to know if Democrats are going to make good on their promise to let all the provisions of the 2001 and 2003 tax bills expire. We are willing to work together on this issue, but again, cooperation will mean resisting calls for draconian tax increases to provide relief from a tax which was never intended to affect so many families.

The Senate will soon be asked to confirm a new Attorney General. Some Members of this body will be tempted to turn the confirmation process into another occasion for seeking political advantage. Democrats have rightly noted that the Justice Department's work is too important to languish without leadership at the top.

And they have promised that if the President's nominee puts the rule of law first, they will avoid confrontation. They will prove they mean it by not looking to secure commitments from the nominee as a condition of his or her confirmation, other than that he or she will faithfully enforce the law.

Attempts to exact political promises and precommitments would be inconsistent with the goal of restoring the Justice Department to full strength as quickly as possible.

Nor should the confirmation of a new Attorney General be used as an excuse to slow down circuit court nominations, starting with Judge Leslie Southwick.

The average number of circuit court confirmations during the final 2 years of similarly situated presidencies is 17. We have fallen off pace to approximate that standard.

At this point, the Senate has only confirmed three circuit court nominees—three. The Senate can begin to make much needed progress in this area by confirming Judge Southwick. The Judiciary Committee voted to send his nomination to the Senate before we broke for recess and he deserves a vote and he deserves it soon.

In my view, the Democratic majority has wasted too much time in the first months of this session playing politics instead of legislating. The working days we have left in this session are too few to be squandered. We need to put aside the political path and come